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Postmodern political values: pluralism and legitimacy in the thought of John Rawls and Gianni Vattimo

The pro tanto values of political legitimization

The difference between traditional liberal political positions and their postmodern counterparts – that is, to be bellicose, between the commitment to the moral reality of liberty and equality and the affirmation of the weakening of metaphysical foundations – oddly does not lie in the political or ethical attachment to the values of liberty and equality themselves. Neither does it seem that the almost already passé conflict between liberalism and communitarianism rests upon a disagreement over those values one finds embodied in the political structures and institutions of the West. For all three of these ideal characters will affirm – when pushed – the desirability of the political values of liberty and equality over, say, those of harmony, order or natural hierarchy and also claim that a society which does not embody the values of liberty and equality is worse than one which does. Where these positions come apart is in the justification of these values and their consequent normative commitments.

When one offers reasons for the rationality of a law or the existence of a particular institution, one normally invokes certain pro tanto political values shared by all agents: equality, liberty, respect, and so on. So, when the government imposes new employment regulations concerning the use of data in job application procedures, the reasons can be reduced to values we all share which stand in a rational relation to the new legal requirements: so, one must not ask for age, race or creed information prior to the interviewing process in order to ensure that all applicants are treated equally and no irrelevant factors influence the decision of the recruitment panel. At base is the commitment to the claim that all members of society have the liberty to pursue

their chosen goals no matter their colour, creed or any other morally irrelevant factors. The values are termed *pro tanto* in the sense that, at a level below philosophical reflection, (1) they are operative in the everyday practical reasoning of the agent, (2) they are immediate and not in need of explicit justification, (3) they motivate the agent over and above contingent desires, and yet, (4) can be violated if circumstances are exceptional. Within and among liberal societies, there may, of course, be disagreements over the relations between these and their various hierarchies, but not on the validity of the central political values themselves. However, when one asks why these values and not, as Plato might have held, order, symmetry, power, and so on, then the various theoretical positions will begin to separate.

The main distinction that interests me here concerns legitimating practices. When one is forced on to the philosophical level of justifying our *pro tanto* values over and above other alternatives, theories separate into, one, those that view these values as universal (derived from reciprocity, autonomy, or a prior principle such as the categorical imperative or the principle of utility) and, two, those that see them as derivable from the tradition and political culture of the agent. For the liberal, these political values are universal moral values which exist independently of any particular society and can measure the justness of a particular policy or institution. The alternative is to implicitly affirm the social thesis: the individual is only who she is by virtue of the tradition which brought her into being and maintains and promotes her identity. The problem with this position is, of course, relativism: it seems to be descriptive rather than normative and liberalism's advantage, especially in its traditional form, is that, as a comprehensive doctrine, it will support and promote the *pro tanto* political values since they coincide with its description of 'true'

metaphysical reality. If human beings are able to use their reason free from coercion, then they would accept the political values of liberalism as true and its vision of society as just and fair.

However, such a justification relies on the metaphysical position of moral realism or, at the least, a universal coherentism, and it was the uneasiness at committing to this justification in terms of truth that motivates Rawls's transition from, arguably, comprehensive liberalism in A Theory of Justice to his later political liberalism. As he often states: under free institutions, the only way to affirm a comprehensive doctrine is to impose it on citizens and that would be a violation of liberalism's central principles. (Rawls, 1993, IV)

Of course, there exists the putative assumption that, since these values are liberal values, the most coherent form of justification must be a liberal one. The aim of this article is to unravel the foundations of this assumption and, in doing so, to demonstrate that the transition from comprehensive to political liberalism is an expression of postmodern concerns at the heart of liberalism. The central claim of the first section will be familiar and seeks only to set the problem: John Rawls's reorientation of political philosophy from problems of justice to problems of legitimacy either does not solve the motivational problems of political action unless he abandons his Kantian account of the person for a commitment to the social thesis. (§2) The novel content of this article concerns the interrogation of Gianni Vattimo's hermeneutical liberalism to demonstrate how the commitment to the social thesis, so offensive to the majority of liberals, can offer a plausible account of political motivation congruent with the demands of legitimacy. But, it must also be committed

to a minimal formal account of practical reason much to the chagrin of the critics of postmodern ethics who accuse all contextual thought of exhibiting strong irrational tendencies. (§3) The intention of the conclusion is to show that whether one begins from the liberal commitment to formal values, or the postmodern contextual commitment to substantive, situated values, one must be committed to a political form of autonomy which is both non-comprehensive and necessarily situated. Moreover, the recognition of these concerns necessitates a simultaneous avowal of postmodern themes in order for political liberalism to be fully coherent and persuasive as a political doctrine, as well as an explicit recognition of the formal claims of reason by any postmodern thought. (§4)

From comprehensive to political liberalism

Rawls's transition from the position he entertained in A Theory of Justice to Political Liberalism still remains an object of considerable disquiet and unease for many of his liberal supporters. The main point of contention seemed to be that he had paid too much heed to his communitarian critics and made too great a concession to the social thesis. (Hampton, 1989; Steinberger, 2000; Wenar, 1995; cf. Krasnoff, 1998)¹ The worry centres on his clear demarcation between two realms of values: the comprehensive and the political. The former justifies values in terms of what is of value to human life as determined by a background context of religious, ethical and metaphysical commitments on the part of the agent. Contrastingly, political values are limited in their scope, being applicable only to debates about the basic structure of society, and are freestanding, in that they can be presented independently of any comprehensive doctrine and justified with reference to a shared public culture. (Rawls, 1998, I: §2; 1999a; 1999b) It is commonly held that the major factor motivating Rawls's new position was the communitarian critique, yet there was

perhaps a more influential reason that compelled the shift in emphasis: the rephrasing of the political question from a concern with justice to a concern with legitimacy.

Most liberal detractors of the new Rawls were mostly – and overtly – concerned with the former of these two factors, but it is the second which best expresses the ‘postmodern’ concerns of political liberalism and is, arguably, of greater significance. (Dreben, 2003)

An uncritical description of the main characteristics of political liberalism would be that it respects each citizen’s freedom and equality as reasonable and rational in that state power is only to be used in ways all citizens might reasonably be expected to endorse. This embodies the central claim of liberal legitimacy for Rawls, yet he realizes, given the fact of pluralism, the use of state power cannot be justified by a comprehensive doctrine. (Rawls, 1999c, 412) Rather, the legitimacy of the organs and institutions of power is derived from an appeal to the values and ideas of public reason and these political values are supported by an overlapping consensus of comprehensive doctrines likely to provide the foundations for a stable and enduring society. (Rawls, 2001, §11.1) Rawls, here, is embodying a central characteristic of liberal political theory into his new account. Free institutions give rise to a pluralism of comprehensive doctrines due to the burdens of judgements, which is the fact that practical reason is unable to definitely decide matters of ethical import and of a political nature. (Rawls, 1993, II:2) In consequence, there will be disagreements over the central values and a continuity of shared adherence to a single comprehensive doctrine, including a comprehensive liberal one, can only be maintained by the oppressive use of state power (the fact of oppression). And such use of state power would be in direct violation of central liberal commitments.

So far, so familiar; but how does the distinction between political and comprehensive values allow Rawls to respond to the most damaging of the communitarian critiques? One of the most significant charges, and the one of most interest here, laid at the door of A Theory of Justice was that it is metaphysically incoherent. The self of the original position is perceived as the ideal rational agent because the procedure guarantees impartiality since the self is freed from the entanglements of social relationships and detached from any constitutive adherence to the good. But, such an agent has no moral depth and it is difficult to see how one can be motivated to do what the rational device prescribes unless one is secretly proposing a form of Kantian 'duty for duty's sake.' (Hegel, 1991, §135R) On such a model, duty just is different in kind to other motivations. Persons, however, are constituted by social goods and motivated by elements of their full, comprehensive identities, social entanglements and personal commitments. It makes little metaphysical sense to posit a rational self in an ideal position as the deciding vote in cases of political and ethical reasoning. (Sandel, 1998, ch. 1)

Rawls believes that his restatement of political subjectivity within the theory of political liberalism is able to evade the charge of metaphysical incoherence because he does not fully detach the political subject from comprehensive commitments. Liberty and equality are motivating for the particular agent because he or she adheres to a comprehensive doctrine that views these values as substantive goods, but as substantive goods they cannot play the role of justifying reasons to other participants in the political arena who, given the fact of pluralism, may not share his or her comprehensive doctrine. As a particular agent, one is committed to a substantive

account of the good, whereas as a political agent, one is committed to agreement on the basis of freestanding, political values which accord with one's comprehensive doctrine. The values of the agent are justified in a three-fold way. First, from a psychological point of view, these values are seemingly axiomatic *pro tanto* values with compelling weight belonging to the public reason of his or her society.² Yet, this means that they are not necessarily motivating since they are only valuable in public and not a private sense, that is divorced from the agent qua particular agent.

Therefore, these political values need also to coincide with substantive commitments of the agent, those values derived from his or her comprehensive doctrine (one's identity); thus, they are seen as a good and can motivate action and allegiance.

(Rawls, 1999b, 473fn) However, it is feasible to assume that certain political values (equality) conflict with comprehensive ones (filial loyalty). In cases such as these Rawls wants to hold that the values of public reason ought to have greater weight than those of the comprehensive doctrine, but he needs to explain why as a political agent I see the equality of fair opportunity as prior to my considered moral judgements, as a private individual, that my son really needs a career and there is a vacancy in my company. Rawls's response becomes pertinent below, and we shall return to it in due course, but let us merely indicate the shape it takes: these political values demand obedience because these values can form a stable overlapping consensus amongst diverse groups which will sustain an enduring society and members of such groups will come to see this as a good if they are brought up under such institutions.

Whatever the influence of communitarianism on Rawls's thinking, the possibility to respond to these criticisms is perhaps a mere side effect of a deeper change in the orientation of his thought; from justice to legitimacy. The communitarian critiques

probably only served to refocus Rawls's question rather than reformulate his possible answers. What is truly at stake in Political Liberalism is the issue of when the power of the state can legitimately be used: sanction and coercion are legitimate when they can be rationally justified to all citizens. However, if one is to fully endorse the position of political liberalism, then there is no real rational preference for the liberal way of life over others. The pro tanto values of liberty and equality are political values which legitimate coercion and sanction because, in our society, they belong to the values of our public reason; that is to say, they are capable of forming the basis for a stable and enduring overlapping consensus of various comprehensive doctrines. So, when a law or policy is imposed on citizens, its legitimacy rests upon its consistency with certain unreflectively endorsed values, most notably liberty and equality.

Liberty and equality are pre-philosophically compelling reasons for all citizens in a liberal state and constituent of a shared axiological fabric. Yet, whereas one citizen may hold these values because he is a Christian, another will do so because she is a Muslim. And others will hold them because they are Kantians, utilitarians and so on. Hence, the pre-philosophically shared pro tanto values are grounded in a pluralism of metaphysical, philosophical and religious commitments that are not necessarily coherent at a deeper level. However, it would not be impossible to imagine the alternative pro tanto values of, say, harmony and order also forming a stable and enduring overlapping consensus for a different society (understood as an historical and geographical development) grounded in diverse metaphysical theories (Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, Sophism, Epicureanism, Paganism and so on). And this is a possibility which Rawls admits. (Rawls, 1999d)

The tension which inhabits Rawls's statement of political liberalism needs to be made explicit with reference to his robust claim that when comprehensive values and political values conflict, it is the latter which ought to be privileged. So, if the commitments of one's religion conflicted with the commitments of public reason, the latter outweigh the former. Yet, the second level of justification of value was introduced in order to show how agents could be committed to the right since it derived from and accorded with substantive beliefs and values of their particular comprehensive doctrine. The problem of conflict seems to reverse this order of explanation and puts into question the motivational power of political values.

Why would Rawls hold that political values outweigh comprehensive ones? This question concerns two separate issues: what motivates Rawls and what the exact nature of political value is. The motivation is simple enough to understand: expediency. Laws need to be endorsed over and above particular or group commitments of the individual otherwise the structure of society itself will become unstable when conflict arises. Society is an arena for the resolution of conflict, not the suppression of it. The description of the nature of political values that enables them, even if they are non-metaphysical, to trump comprehensive one is, however, more difficult to understand and involves two aspects. One, political values are very great values indeed and they are not easily overridden; and two, political values form an overlapping consensus that will endure over time. (Rawls, 1993, IV: §1) The relationship between these two features of political values is that the greatness of these values pre-exists their capacity to form an overlapping consensus and, as such, Rawls can deny that he is guilty of introducing the social thesis into liberal thought. Political values constitute a coherent view of the values which each particular agent

brings into political participation. If one is reasonable, that is committed to mutual and reciprocal agreement, then one will recognize the role of liberal values in constraining permissible ideas of the good and, more significantly, making possible and sustaining ways of life that citizens can affirm as worthwhile.

The distinction between the political and the comprehensive is, however, keenly felt when the subject is torn between values. Take the example of these two principles: I believe I ought to do the best for my family and I believe that employment positions ought to be distributed with due concern for fair equality of opportunity. Then, my son applies for a vacancy in my company for which he is not the best candidate. The conception of the good that immediately motivates me is that I should do the best for my son, derived from my personal commitments, identity and social entanglements. However, Rawls holds that the political values will have greater weight than the comprehensive ones because the values of liberty, respect, equality, et al, constitute a very great public good. So, the notion of the right, in itself, cannot motivate unless it coincides with goods that outweigh my egoism or filial loyalty: the need to keep the peace, the need for a stable society, the need for me to be treated fairly in the future, and so on. Only in such a manner can we avoid the curious Kantian duty for duty's sake.

Let us reflect a little more deeply on what exactly is at stake here. When the communitarians criticized the unencumbered self of the original position, Rawls was at pains to stress it was a mere rational construct. The claim that the rational subject is able to forgo personal commitments for the sake of very great values indeed, that is political ones, exacerbates the odd Kantian psychology implicit in Rawls's earlier

work unless he can show that political values are privileged in the practical reason of the individual since the formal values of liberalism are also substantive goods which demand allegiance from subjects belonging to a liberal way of life. (Rawls, 1999b, 487) And here the full problem comes into view. The explanation of why these political values are goods can take three forms. One, the historical development of liberalism has generated a way of life in which the citizens of liberal democracies feel at home and find their identity. However, if Rawls embraces this option, then it is an avowal of the social thesis and the values of liberty and equality are right for us, but not transcendentally (to our culture) so. Two, Rawls often hints at the good of stability. Our society is able to form an overlapping consensus that will endure over time and a stable society is a good society. So, the values of liberty and equality are justified in terms of a new value: stability. However, this is problematic for two reasons: first, the political arena seemingly becomes a sphere of compromise and this is explicitly what Rawls did not want and, second, oppressive regimes (as Hobbes well knew) can be extremely stable but are still not desirable societies, so a society cannot be merely stable but its stability has to be grounded in those values a reasonable citizen might endorse. (Rawls, 1999e, 432) Three, in consequence, Rawls may want to assert that not only is our society stable, but it is stable for the right reasons. Such an assertion would rule out the problems with the Hobbesian account of stability above, but this opens Rawls up to a charge circularity since stability for the right reasons seems to be a stability founded on free and equal citizens and, more significantly, political liberalism becomes to resemble a comprehensive doctrine and will only be enforceable through coercion. (Wingenbach, 1999, 221-2)³

The choice is, then, either to admit that political liberalism commits one to an acceptance of the social thesis and hence one is unable to easily argue that liberty and equality are intrinsically more valuable than harmony and order; or one can offer a justification of the values of liberty and equality independent of a particular politico-historical tradition, but this is seemingly a comprehensive doctrine and will lead to coercion given the fact of oppression. Rawls's neat division of the historical origin of liberalism (the Wars of Religion) from the qualitative worth of its values is not as insignificant to his argument as is commonly held and plays a fundamental role in the relationship between the political and the embedded self with relation to practical reasoning. (Rawls, 1993, introduction) The social and material conditions of contemporary culture, that is the political context of liberal constitutional democracy with its irresistible tendency to value pluralism, the rational egalitarianism of post-Reformation thought and the inherent social individualism of capitalism, require a practically efficacious and theoretically compelling account of political legitimation derived from a shared value system. And only if it acknowledges the historical origin of these values, can political liberalism evade the charge of metaphysical incoherence concerning the rational psychology of the agent.

We ought then to look at an account of postmodern reason which begins from rather than reaches this point. Any subject who seeks to legitimate a political judgement must appeal to the substantive social goods of his or her contextual identity, which – in our case – just happen to be liberty and equality, et cetera. Rawls, and most liberals, are loathe to do so since the problem of normativity returns: although our values can be rational to us within a specific tradition, there is no universal justification to export or compare them to values of other, alien cultures. One is

forced to remain silent in the face of practices such as ritualistic human sacrifice and female circumcision, since although they violate liberty and equality, it may be the case that divine obedience belongs to the public reason of the other culture.

Postmodern thought needs to aspire to be more than a mere descriptive genealogy of values and show why the rational agent ought to be committed to the values of political liberalism over and above those of other cultures.

Vattimo's ethics of interpretation and the rational postmodern

Vattimo's ethics of interpretation is an attempt to offer a minimally rational position consistent with truth as interpretation. The dual faceted nature of value judgements, in that they are seemingly both practical and rational has underpinned various modern attitudes. The tenor of scientific rationalism has been to deny the rational nature of such statements; when I state that 'killing is wrong' or 'that is beautiful' all I am doing is expressing an attitude I have towards the object in question. Facts are epistemologically 'higher' than values since the latter are not truth-apt as they express mere interests and preferences. Much postmodern thought is concerned with undermining this dichotomy by demonstrating that knowledge, too, is an expression of human interests and group preferences. (Bauman, 1993) The central and repeated claim of Vattimo's thought is that once one realizes that there is no interest-free view from nowhere, then one is liberated from the constraints of inauthentic existence. (Rose, 2002) However, this distributes truth and objectivity on the same epistemic stratum as interpretation and it seems that constraints on ways of life fade away, seemingly leaving an anarchic play of power between groups and individuals in the political sphere: there is no reason to accept one's own values or the values of others in any sense other than arbitrariness and pure wilfulness.⁴ Vattimo attempts, however, to demonstrate that some interpretations are, in some sense, better than

others. So, instead of facts being levelled down to the status of preferences and interests, values are levelled up to the status of facts. The commitment to the responsibility of interpretation and the need for a reflective relation between the historical subject and his or her tradition resolves itself into a position which shares many of the features of political liberalism and yet, I argue, offers a way to mitigate its central tension.

There seemingly exists an immediate parallel between Rawls and Vattimo which is, however, deceptive: the pluralism of contemporary society. The nature of their respective pluralisms is different though. For Rawls, it is a consequence of his radical empiricism: under free institutions people are able to form their own conceptions of the good and, given the burdens of judgement, it is nigh on impossible that there will be decided resolution of, and highly improbable that there will even be homogeneous agreement on, the substantive goods of a human life. One may understand this as pluralism by default; one is agnostic about the metaphysical existence of one true good, but given the limits of reason, it is unlikely – even if there were such a thing – men would be able to cognize it and communicate it to others. For Vattimo, on the other hand, the metaphysics that underpins the belief in a unitary and universal good for all corrupts free thinking by privileging the subject-object relation as the locus of truth. Knowledge is, by its nature, a contextual enterprise and cannot be otherwise:

There are no transcendental conditions of possibility for experience which might be attainable through some type of reduction or epoché suspending our ties to historical-cultural, linguistic, categorical horizons. The conditions of possibility for experience are always

qualified... The foundation, the beginning, the initial transmission of our discourse cannot, in other words, but be a hermeneutic foundation. (Vattimo, 1984, 152)

Due to the multiplication of perspectives and the emergence of isolated and fragmented histories, there is no longer one reality to represent but many depending on those interests expressed in the knowledge discourse: the truth of the Proletarian class, of the West, of white males and so on. The assumption that there is but one truth and but one method or discourse adequate to its representation has been weakened leaving no discourse in a privileged position.

The distinction which motivates the two presentations of pluralism has significant consequences, nicely brought out if one considers another central normative commitment of liberalism, namely tolerance. Tolerance, for Rawls, as we have seen, is born from a necessity to avoid suffering and war in Europe when the people had come to the conclusion that it was unlikely there would ever be any incontrovertible agreement on theological doctrine. (Rawls, 1993, introduction) Conflict over comprehensive doctrines is a brute fact of human existence and tolerance is one particular historical response to this problem. The value of tolerance, over generations, then becomes a very great value indeed and occupies a privileged position in the practical reasoning of the subject born and educated under liberal institutions (whether he or she be Muslim, Christian or Jew.) For Vattimo, however, since pluralism is not an empirical condition but a transcendental condition of knowledge, tolerance is, then, an a priori normative requirement for free and sincere thinking. If this is so, then to say tolerance occupies a special place in practical

reasoning is no longer required. Once one reflects, one is being tolerant. If one is intolerant, one is in error.

The goal, then, of Vattimo's ethics of interpretation is to show that liberal political values have a privileged role in the subject's practical reason because when one reflects, one seeks to legitimate the ground of one's comprehensive commitments to others and, hence, one must be committed to avoiding error. Over and above tolerance, one must also recognize and be aware of the contextual, embedded nature of one's identity:

The main feature of an ethics of this kind is that it takes a 'step backward,' takes its distance from the choices and concrete options that are directly imposed by the situation. (Vattimo, 2004, 41)

This is the recognition that those motivations and values which impinge on the agent's practical reason in a concrete situation must be put into question in order to ensure both their validity and relevance to the matter in hand. The step back is the disentanglement of the moral self from the particular self achieved in liberalism by the divorce of the universal from the contingent. One famous way to achieve this is the heuristic device of the original position, of course. (Rawls, 1971, part 1)

However, the second characteristic of Vattimo's ethics is the avowal that such a step back is not to some prior nor privileged (one might say, 'original') epistemic or moral position; thus, avoiding the reintroduction of the Kantian motivation schism. Ethics cannot – as communitarianism reminds liberalism – prescribe from the void. The subject of liberalism is unencumbered and hence rationality is replaced by the

affirmation of mere preferences or partial interests. The stepping back, for Vattimo, is not a denial of finitude:

An ethics of finitude tries to keep faith with the discovery that one's own provenance is 'located,' in a way always and insuperably finite, without forgetting the pluralistic implications of this discovery. I go to church with the saints, and to the tavern with the 'guys', as we say in Italian, and I can never delude myself that I am really standing somewhere else, somewhere loftier. Even as I am writing this philosophical paper, I am merely in another condition, which imposes certain obligations on me like any other: the particular condition of the philosopher, essayist, critic, never that of Universal Man. (Vattimo, 2004, 44)

In other words, the situation of the speaker – the voice and its tradition – is equivalent to the comprehensive values: it is impossible to negate these values and still make substantial political or ethical commitments. So, liberty, respect, et al, must be both formal and substantive: formal in order to make free and open dialogue possible; substantive otherwise in cases of conflict between political values and comprehensive ones, there is no reason for the former to have greater weight. Reasonableness is, for Rawls, the capacity for a doctrine to conform with the freestanding political values in an enduring overlapping consensus, whereas, for Vattimo, reasonable doctrines cannot violate the norms of free thinking. Therefore, for both of them, a universal requirement of a doctrine in order to be considered a partner in consensus is respect towards the other:

Respect for others is, above all, recognition of the finitude that characterizes all of us and that rules out any complete conquest of the opacity that every person bears. (Vattimo, 2004, 47)

It is the subject, rather than the doctrine, that is or is not reasonable and the grounding norm is one of political autonomy, that is, autonomy independent of any metaphysical or comprehensive doctrine. And the formal requirement of this norm is to treat others with respect. For Vattimo, this respect is grounded in an anti-metaphysical claim: truth is plural; whereas for Rawls it is grounded in radical empiricism and the consequences of the burdens of judgement.

According to Vattimo, when a comprehensive doctrine justifies political values that all agents must accept, it is an instance of the violence of metaphysics: 'metaphysics is violent thinking: the foundation, if it is given in incontrovertible evidence that no longer admits further enquiry, is like an authority that keeps things quiet and takes control without explanation.' (Vattimo, 1997, 40) Such violence is nothing but the fact of oppression. The subject-object relation is only a conditional possibility of knowledge if the subject is ethically impartial and epistemologically objective, but, in postmodern thought, it is no longer a question of what is said but always who is speaking; every pretence at impartiality or objectivity is the hidden and perhaps unconscious expression of a group or individual worldview which is but one truth amongst many. But it could not be otherwise. The anti-metaphysical nature of postmodern thought supplies an implicit commitment to political liberalism and tolerance in a way that Rawls's radical empiricism fails to do. One finds at the heart of Vattimo's endeavour a coincidence between the aspirations of modernity (the

refusal of blind obedience to authority) and liberalism (the values of liberty, equality, respect and tolerance):

There is no foundation for subordinating oneself to a given and transcendent objective order, nor for subordinating oneself to someone who could demand obedience in the name of that order alone. In the world without foundations, everyone is equal and the imposition of any system of meaning on others is violence and oppression, for it can never legitimate itself by referring to an objective order. The only possible foundation for the predominance of an order of meaning is force. (Vattimo, 1992, 95)

The absence of the values of political liberalism reduces dialogue to the level of might is right where the preferences of those who are more powerful or more violent win out. Thus, it seems there is a universal commitment to liberal political values otherwise there is no way to transcendently rule out force as a valid form of legitimacy, and this perhaps explains better why they are very great values indeed. Notice, as an overt example, the (very un-Nietzschean) claim that the end of metaphysical foundations has the consequence of entailing a commitment on the part of the subject to the norm of equality. So, equality is not brought about as a mere by-product of the wars of religion, or the imposition of accidental social theories, but is written into the very nature of hermeneutic truth: if there is not one truth, then there are many truths and yours – as well as mine – is on equal footing. Without the historical emergence of the modern subject, politics is nothing but games of power

between interested groups and individuals. With the modern subject, politics for the first time becomes properly ethical.

Vattimo's full ethics of interpretation is characterized in this quotation:

Whether or not they [the rational norms] still hold good is something to be decided in light of the criterion that, with a responsible interpretation, we take to be characteristic of whatever 'really' forms part of the legacy to which we feel ourselves committed. If we find this criterion in nihilism, in the dissolution of ultimate foundations and their universability (the violent refusal to have them questioned), then the choice between what holds good and what does not in the cultural heritage from which we come will be made on the basis of the reduction of violence and under the sign of rationality understood as discourse-dialogue between defenders of finite positions who recognize that that is what they are and who shun the temptation to impose their position on others illegitimately (through validation by first principles). (Vattimo, 2004, 46)

Note, here, that Vattimo hints at the better interpretation in stating that the agent is to seek that heritage to which he or she is 'truly' obliged. That tradition is liberalism of the sort that encourages free thinking: one realizes that one's values are grounded in an interpretation of reality, but an interpretation is not mere fiction nor

inconsequential, but one truth amongst many. When the dichotomy of truth and the expression of interests is deconstructed, one is left with neither truth nor fiction and the raising up of the epistemic status of political values and the levelling down of the epistemic status of comprehensive values leads to a coincidence in their weight.

Vattimo talks explicitly of a responsible interpretation of one's own moral fabric with all its inherent values and the recognition that such values derive from a worldview and not from incontrovertible, absolute truth. And the values which are to be preferred are those which – although derived from a particular tradition – are judged by the criteria of tolerance (the reduction of violence) and consensus (the recognition that agreement is not grounded in the legitimacy of one comprehensive doctrine over another, but in the recognition of the finitude of one's own and the other's position).

The schizophrenic Kantian psychology which haunts Rawls's position even in Political Liberalism can now be replaced by a horizontal embedded self produced by the value pluralism of contemporary society and regulated by the primacy of the practical (political and ethical) commitment to free thinking. Vattimo would defend the primacy of practical over theoretical reason since tolerance becomes a necessary attitude of the philosopher if he or she is to be sincere. Otherwise, his or her assertions would be prejudiced, partial or dogmatic. (Vattimo, 2004, ch. 8) If one is to engage in reflection and thinking, then one must suspend judgement on assertions until such time that their refusal or rejection is incontrovertible and that means the thinker who does not is not committed to reason. This is the primacy of practical over theoretical reason and, perhaps not so oddly anymore, Jean Hampton's criticism of Rawls, which centres on his separation of the political from the metaphysical, offers a conclusion which is very reminiscent. Respect, for her, is both a philosophical and a political commitment in the face of anti-modern fundamentalism, obedience to

authority and violence in dialogue: 'Such respect is the foundation not only of philosophy but also of liberal society; it is that upon which we must insist if we wish to have either. One who is committed to philosophy must also be committed to remaining intolerant of others' intolerance. To attempt to reach consensus with intolerant true believers would be to betray one's belief in the respect that grounds one's very philosophizing.' (Hampton, 1989, 812)

Furthermore, the ethics of interpretation offers its own version of Rawls's political-comprehensive distinction, even if it is not named. The subject is an historical product immediately motivated by the comprehensive values of his tradition which are true if they cohere with the standard of rationality of that tradition. Yet, the hermeneutic subject is more: reason is no longer adherence to the principles which originate from a worldview, but the rationality of an open dialogue between versions of truth in order to garner agreement and reduce violence. On the one hand, one is committed to consistency; on the other, one is committed to consensus. For this hermeneutic truth, the embedded subject must also be committed to certain preconditions that make free and transparent dialogue possible and also rule out the violence of metaphysics. The precondition holds that a doctrine has the right to be expressed in dialogue if it meets the criteria of respect and tolerance and is aimed at consensus. These are the same conditions, more or less, that a doctrine must meet to be considered reasonable and form an overlapping consensus with other doctrines, but instead of either a genealogical justification or one based in Kantian psychology, the justification is that a doctrine must be an example of free thinking.

So, it seems that Vattimo is claiming that respect, tolerance, liberty and equality are normative commitments for the subject who inhabits the fabric of contemporary society. The normative commitments of an ethics of interpretation coincide with the values of political liberalism and, moreover, explain why the political is privileged over and above the comprehensive as it supplies a rational basis – acceptable to all – for inter-cultural dialogue. These values are ethical and necessary in order to produce the subject who can offer a responsible interpretation. Such a subject is not a knowing subject which would test strong truth; that is, the correspondence of an object to its conditions of being experienced. The hermeneutic subject is ethical because the norms which oblige him or her should guarantee the absence of violence: one must be able to step back, that is not be coerced or irrevocably bound to one's tradition (liberty), one must recognize the finitude of one's position and that of others (tolerance) and one must recognize the right of all individuals to their own responsibly articulated and interpreted tradition (equality and respect).

The hermeneutic values of the ethics of interpretation and political liberalism coincide and the substantive commitment of the ethics of interpretation with its implicit endorsement of the social thesis better explains why political values trump comprehensive values in cases of conflict. The concern remains, however, that this approach has ceded too much and political liberalism and its values are relevant only to a specific society, that is the society characterized by value pluralism. The challenge is to be able to state, in no uncertain terms, that certain ways of life are better than others and certain social practices are universally wrong.

It seems that Rawls and Vattimo are both committed to the autonomy of the subject and its liberation, even if such a liberation is no longer a matter of the imposition of universal reason. (Freeman, 2007, 361-3) The postmodern condition is, peculiarly and surprisingly, a commitment to the universality not of individual reason but of social dialogue. Vattimo affirms an implicit postmodern normativity that inverts Rawls:

The task of philosophy, once it is aware of the postmodern condition, consists in articulating this pre-comprehension; attempting, or better inventing, starting from this very condition (projecting) a guiding thread for choices and plans, from individual ethics to politics. In place of the nostalgic effort, characteristic of reactive nihilism, to go back to 'values', it is a question of actively continuing the 'active nihilistic' work of the destruction of absolutes. For what reason? For an individual ethics or a political society explicitly grounded in the free choice of that which, of course always starting from the path where we already find ourselves, most certainly appears capable of liberating us from idols... (Vattimo, 2007, 37)

The subject must begin from the comprehensive and move towards the political, that is move from individual ethics to political values, and not vice versa. For Rawls, we had to begin from the original position and then impose its conditions, slowly and stage by stage, on comprehensive commitments. The overriding norm for Vattimo is liberation from idols, from superstition, that is not from beliefs simply understood as

false, but specifically from those beliefs used for political manipulation. The reflective and secular nature of our society is universally desirable. The privilege of liberal values does not lie in moral realism (Rawls and Vattimo agree on this), but in a commitment to one substantial good: the political freedom to make one's own choice. The commitment has different sources: for Rawls it is radical empiricism and the belief that comprehensive doctrines have been wrong in the past and are more than likely still in error; for Vattimo, there is no one truth or way of life which is intrinsically, universally better than them all. Oddly, both commit one to a form of life that allows all interests to be expressed and considered with respect. That is, a liberal form of life.

Conclusion

Vattimo and Rawls both agree that the aim of political dialogue is consensus and coherence but not truth, implicitly insisting on the notion of the other as a respected participant in discourse unless he or she is unreasonable. The values that make possible a sincere interpretation of others and oneself regulate one's comportment to others and coincide neatly with the values of political liberalism. Such values can be derived, bottom-up, from the social and moral fabric of postmodern culture. Rawls's political liberalism is top-down: it imposes the values of liberalism on pluralism in order to resolve conflict; whereas Vattimo's ethics of interpretation is bottom-up: it posits the values of political liberalism as the consequence of the multiplication of worldviews. For both, the values of political liberalism are universal because they make possible a mature, reflective society which has developed to the level where it is confident enough to put into question its own beliefs and values in the face of dialogue with the other.⁵ Such an exercise of practical wisdom is an opening up of possibilities and the opportunity to discuss, freely and openly with the other.

Vattimo is, however, perhaps too conservative: the agent's first obligation is to the tradition from which he speaks and, at times, his position is in danger of being nothing but a sociological description of postmodern society rather than a normative prescription of certain ethical values. The subject for Vattimo must listen to his tradition and be responsible in his interpretation of it, yet the values conferred on him or her cannot play the role of legitimation in a plural society. However, if Vattimo is guilty of making the political sphere too comprehensive, then Rawls is guilty of the opposite: his values run the risk of becoming purely formal and only substantive if they happen to coincide with particular comprehensive commitments of the agent, thus raising serious concerns over one's allegiance to the political order in cases of conflict. The avowal of the social thesis and the affirmation of the postmodern substratum have this advantage over Rawls's presentation of political liberalism: the normative values which determine one's conversation with the other are aimed at consensual agreement on values that are shared and equally intelligible. Respect, tolerance and liberty are the substantial account of the good which constitutes postmodern society and therefore one can see how the political values will trump the comprehensive values in cases of conflict if one is sincerely engaged in conversation. Conversely, Rawls's own formal rationalism is required by any contextual politics since, by divorcing the political subject who – in a sense – is autonomous and privileged in the activity of political discourse from the particular subject, he ensures that the social thesis does not undermine the normative aims of dialogue and refuses blind obedience to authority.

¹ For reasons of economy of space, I make reference to the most relevant pieces of the enormous secondary material on Rawls. Rather cheekily, however, I direct the reader to the fantastic bibliography in Freeman (2007, 515-35), especially the section entitled 'political liberalism' and also to the discussions and suggestions for further reading in Mulhall & Swift (1996).

² For a discussion of the use of 'pro tanto' here, please refer back to §1.

³ The inadequate mention of 'stability for the right reasons' does not do sufficient justice to the subtlety of Rawls's own rather complex thinking on this issue. For more thorough and elaborate discussion, the reader ought to refer to Freeman (2007, ch. 8) and also Barry (1995).

⁴ Postmodern thought characterized thus is, then, the target of Hegel's criticism of post-Kantian arbitrariness. (Hegel, 1991, §140).

⁵ The position is very similar to the one reached by MacIntyre. (1988, ch. 18)

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